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ABSTRACT

Results of recent surveys of students, parents, and communities in west-central Minnesota indicate a great desire for vocational education and a perception of vocational education for a job as a basic skill. The rural student needs greater access to vocational programming in order to help break patterns of poverty and open the vision of students who might otherwise view the world from a limited perspective. The goals of vocational education are usually to help students explore occupational fields in depth, to prepare students for entry into full-time or part-time employment generally at the semi-skilled level, and to prepare students to succeed more quickly in related post-secondary occupational programs at a college or technical institute. Generally the governance of secondary vocational education can be described as: (1) comprehensive high schools, which operate secondary programs including vocational and non-vocational subjects; (2) vocational high schools, which offer a full-time program of study in vocational and non-vocational subjects; (3) area vocational technical centers, which serve high school students on a shared-time basis as a part of their regular high school program and usually cover a regional area; and (4) intermediate school districts, special districts which may include vocational education as one of their functions. (AN)

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN A RURAL SETTING

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As current President-elect of the American Vocational Association, and as a four year member of the board of directors of the AVA, I have had the opportunity to visit vocational education programs throughout the United States. Since my work has been primarily in a rural setting, this has been my special interest. My comments are based upon my observations and study of other states, my nine years of experience as a vocational center director in one of the most sparsely populated areas of Minnesota, and particularly upon my experiences in expanding our vocational center from three to thirteen school districts as well as increasing the enrollment from 79 students to 1536.

Within the parameters of my work, we operate vocational education programs at the secondary and adult level, both within local districts and at central locations including simulations and cooperative training arrangements.

During the last ten years, we have seen many innovations in education. These innovations have been primarily structural. They have included modular scheduling, the quarter system, class periods of uneven lengths, ungraded classrooms, open classrooms and structures where teachers know individual students well and serve as advisors to small groups of students. This seems to be the solution that urban schools are working toward, but it is what small rural schools have done for decades. This direction in education was born out by the Carnegie Commission Report when they pointed to the need for smaller units for more effective education.

Prepared for: The Rural Small School Education Conference, Kansas State University, November 10-11, 1980

Rural populations are usually classified as groups which have historically experienced lower achievement and attainment. The poor, ethnic and racial minorities, and women who lack specialized skills, are grouped together as disadvantaged largely by their geographical area and lack of opportunities. As with other minorities, it could be documented that substantial numbers of rural Americans suffer from problems of opportunity, achievement, services, attainment and stereotyping if they are to be contrasted to comparable urban groups. There is a sharply differing economic and occupational structure that is often associated with the place of residence. Usually the rural economy centers around agricultural production and services while the urban economy is more diversified. The rural occupational structure may be less differentiated than the urban structure. This could have negative implications for rural youth as they compete for available jobs. For those who remain in the rural locale, there will be fewer types of jobs available. Those who have migrated to the city seeking jobs may have contributed to the growth of urban ghettos and slums. Rural youth have generally perceived that the urban area has a more favorable job market even though the individual may be learning to live within a new environment while competing for jobs. The job problems may well be compounded by limited high school educational offerings as well as limited counseling.

Many individuals find it difficult to draw attention to the educational problems of rural areas because of the very evident crisis in large cities particularly in the area of youth employment. By its very nature, rural population is dispersed over a large area with few people in any one locale, so problems can be somewhat invisible. This makes it nearly impossible for

one to easily experience the full impact of rural poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, unemployment and lack of educational opportunity as dramatically as that produced by a visit to an urban ghetto. I would contend that problems of rural america, particularly those in the educational area, are of large magnitude and widespread.

The majority of rural areas are suffering from problems of declining enrollment. As such, it is becoming more difficult to:

1. Maintain courses and programs
2. Maintain balanced staff
3. Expand programs to meet needs
4. Maintain community support
5. Provide transportation and facilities
6. Comply with mandates (e.g. Public Law 94-482)

Yet, in a survey of students in west-central Minnesota, an overwhelming majority (96%) of the students stated that they would like to learn more about different occupations. This seems to point to a need for both vocational course work and vocational counseling so that students can have the opportunity to learn more about the various aspects of different occupations that do not exist in their community. Again, over 77% stated that they would be willing to travel to other schools to take courses. More than 50% stated that they would give up other types of courses or extra curricular activities to take high school vocational courses and 60% of the students felt that high school should place more emphasis on preparing students for education in general.

In a similar survey of parents, 50% said that the variety of secondary vocational courses for their students was inadequate and felt that high

school budgets should be reallocated to spend more on vocational courses. Parents favored encouraging more students to enroll in vocational courses. They endorsed a philosophy of training students in broad general basic occupational areas that would be helpful in a variety of occupations rather than specific job training for immediate employment.

In a companion community survey, more than 80% of the general community said that the school should encourage more students to enroll in vocational courses, while over 50% of the survey favored a reallocation of dollars for vocational education courses.

This data and other similar research indicates that even though enrollments are declining and we hear a national hue and cry for a return to basic skills, vocational education for a job is viewed as a basic skill. The student desire for vocational education is documented as being very great and born out by student enrollment figures. Many rural schools find it very difficult to provide adequate vocational education offerings both to train students and to give them exposure to opportunities available in the working world because of inadequate finances and enrollment.

If secondary vocational education was mentioned to someone 20, or even 10 years ago, he or she may have thought of a classroom tucked into the basement of a high school with a little shingle above the door that read: "MANUAL ARTS" or a consumer homemaking program or a vocational agriculture program... and that memory wouldn't have been very far from the mark.

But today, vocational programs for high school students are offered in a wide range of areas: from marine and air transportation to public utilities and from health to fine arts.

The origin of government-sponsored secondary vocational education can be traced to federal legislation passed in 1917 which sent federal dollars to the states for agricultural, trade and industrial and home economics education. The emphasis was still in these areas in 1963 when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Vocational Education Act. This Act vastly expanded the range of programs and sent additional money to the states. State Legislatures also stepped up their appropriations for vocational education at this time; 1968 amendments to the 1963 Act further expanded vocational programs and funding. There was further emphasis with the 1976 amendments and the expected reauthorization legislation may involve some change in direction.

Even with the additional government support, it was difficult for single school districts to offer a much broader range of programs. This was particularly true of rural areas where resources were very limited. This need formed the basis of area vocational schools, cooperative vocational centers, cooperative vocational centers or paired school arrangements. In some states, there is a regional state system, in some a mandated county system, and in others an optional system whereby schools may work together. In this way, they are able to better utilize their combined resources and serve a larger number of students in these courses which require adequate laboratories and equipment, job training stations, and instructors with special skills.

Funding for vocational education may come from sources including school district taxes, state foundation aid, and vocational categorical aid. Courses offered usually last one or two years, for 1-3 hours per day and seniors are given first preference in enrolling.

The goals for secondary vocational education are usually:

1. To help students explore occupational fields in depth
2. To prepare students for entry into full time or part-time employment generally at the semi-skilled level
3. To prepare students to succeed more quickly in related post-secondary occupational programs at a college or technical institute.

Generally the governance of secondary vocational education can be roughly described as:

1. Comprehensive High Schools - operate secondary programs including vocational and non-vocational subjects
2. Vocational High Schools - offer a full time program of study in vocational and non-vocational subjects
3. Area Vocational Technical Centers - serve high school students on a shared time basis as a part of their regular high school program, usually cover a regional area
4. Intermediate School Districts - a special school district which may include vocational education as one of its functions.

Vocational education today is more than the manual arts, agriculture or home economics of 1917. Last year, approximately 10.2 million high school students took some form of vocational education.

It is evident that the rural student needs equal access to the vocational programming that is available to students in more populous areas. This can help to break patterns of poverty and open the vision of students who might otherwise view their world from a limited perspective. The national need for technically skilled workers shows that opportunities can be available but training is needed as well as initiative both in attracting industry to rural areas and selecting appropriate training areas through adequate vocational counseling which offers good employment opportunities.

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